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Briefing Notes: USSR

To further his whole reform campaign, Gorbachev has unleashed a political debate and struggle within the USSR that exceeds what occurred after Stalin's death. It concerns the very legitimacy of the Soviet system and its history. The intellectuals find it liberating. But many of them and most of the rest of the society find it frightening and threatening. The political and psychological importance of this great debate cannot be minimized. It is a country in search of its soul. But beneath all the smoke and fire little has yet changed and little is really going well for Gorbachev in his effort to reform the economy, the society, and the political process.

1. Power Base

Russia has always needed a strong leader to impose even liberal change. Gorbachev has great personal strength as a skillful leader with a program. But he still lacks institutional strength, especially in the party. We'll see if the Party Conference changes this.

2. "Democratization"

Gorbachev needs to reduce the lock of the party apparatus on the advancement of new leaders and the day-to-day management of the society, and to open things up to popular participation. He has not yet done this, although everyone is talking about it.

3. Economic reform

Gorbachev has promulgated reforms that will give enterprises more freedom and create something of a wholesale market. But these have yet to be implemented and bureaucrats are blocking them. The incredibly difficult business of price reform lies ahead still.

4. Advanced machinery for industry

An upswing in the production of advanced machinery for industry was supposed to be the engine for modernizing the economy and boosting productivity. This seems to have bogged down.

5. Consumption

Gorbachev won't get the broad population on his side for real change unless and until he actually improves their daily lives with more and better food and consumer goods. He hasn't done this. If anything, daily life has gotten worse in part because they aren't supposed to seek relief in drinking.

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Does all this mean that Gorbachev has failed? By no means, at least, not yet. But perestroika is still an aircraft that is revving its engines and taxiing around on the runway. It has yet to take off. In fact, Gorbachev has used something of the same analogy: He says perestroika is like a rocket in initial boost phase. That's where the blowups and crashes typically happen.

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